**Testimony for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) —
Hearing on the status of freedom of religion or belief within the ongoing conflict in Syria.
May 10, 2022**

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1. **How has the Assad regime transformed the secular and democratic revolution of
2011 into a brutal sectarian conflict?**

Most experts agree that the Syrian regime bears primary responsibility for the
transformation of the 2011 civil uprising into a sectarian civil war. Yet, there are divergent
views as to how this process unfolded in practice.

One first approach can be described as strategic or instrumental, as it emphasizes the
regime's deliberate attempts to radicalize the conflict. Proponents of this view consider that
the regime believed it had a better chance of winning a military confrontation than to
suppress a wide-scale civilian uprising, and that as a result, it sought to provoke violent
reactions through harsh repression. As per this narrative, likewise, the regime
instrumentalized sectarian sentiments to preserve the cohesion of the Alawite community
and bolster support from other minorities. Therefore, it created a fertile environment for
those challengers who were willing to promote countervailing sectarian and ethnic (i.e.
Sunni and Kurdish) identities for the purpose of political mobilization. One of the main
arguments in support of the "strategic thesis" is that the regime helped Jihadi insurgents get
started by releasing hundreds of Islamist detainees throughout 2011, most of which later
formed the leadership of hardline rebel factions.

Another, contrary opinion on the regime's responsibility in the sectarianization of the
uprising could be termed institutionalist. According to this view, which was most
convincingly articulated by Kevin Mazur (in *Revolution in Syria. Identity, Networks, and
Repression.* Cambridge University Press, 2021), the regime's sectarian make-up (that is, the
massive over-representation of Alawites within armed forces, and, to a lesser extent, among
state institutions at large) made radicalization of the conflict inevitable regardless of Assad's
decisions after March 2011. Advocates of this approach argue that a minority regime such as
Assad's had no interest in sowing a sectarian civil war that could eventually put it on a
collision course with the majority of Syria's population, hence its enduring pretense to stand
for national unity.

Both views hold some truth, considering that the regime simultaneously implemented
contradictory policies. From the very first weeks of the uprising, it tried to convince
minorities that they were fighting for their survival in the face of the revenge of the Sunni
majority. For instance, on 18 April 2011, that is, many months before radical Islamist factions
started to play any significant role in the conflict, Minister of Interior warned that
demonstrators in Homs were establishing a "Salafi emirate"; similar messaging was
systematically carried out at the local level. At the same time, the regime tried to rally
support among Sunnis by pretending to stand for the state and nation, and by insisting that
it was only at war with an extremist fringe among the country's religious majority. What

Assad was probably (and mistakenly) hoping for, in the first months of the crisis, was that radical elements within the opposition would become visible enough to frighten minorities, mainstream Sunnis, and foreign powers, while at the same time remaining too weak to pose a serious challenge the state's military apparatus. In other words, the regime tried to manipulate sectarian fears in its own interests, but it did not seek to turn the conflict into a full-on sectarian war, which (considering Syria's demographics) it was bound to lose—and it almost did, weren't it for direct Iranian and Russian military interventions few could have predicted in 2011.

In this respect, I do agree with the institutionalist view that the main reason for the sectarianization of the Syrian uprising should not be looked for in the regime's deliberate strategies, but rather in long-standing governance practices that shaped the revolt as well as incumbent responses to the latter. Early risers formulated demands that were either citizenship-focused (i.e. asking for civil and political rights), or parochial (i.e. centered on local grievances), but not sectarian. Citizenship-focused demands were formulated by cross-sectarian networks of activists that were rapidly debilitated. Activists from minority background found themselves isolated in the face of state repression due to strong disapproval of their political stance on the part of communal authorities (e.g. leaders of Christian Churches) or, in the case of most Alawites, because their own families were closely tied to the regime through employment in the state's armed forces.

Citizenship-focused Sunni and non-Sunni activists who were not arrested or killed eventually sought refuge abroad or among local Sunni communities whose initially parochial challenge to the regime gradually took a more sectarian turn because of failed regime attempts at taming the protests. In those peripheral Sunni regions, state penetration was insufficient to allow for the selective isolation of individual activists. Resultingly, the regime tried to put an end to the protests through a combination of violent tactics and negotiations with notables to whom authorities had long outsourced aspects of local governance. However, such conciliatory moves failed due to the regime's inability to deliver on its promises to ease up on repression, and (a fortiori) to implement genuine political reforms. Consequently, dense social networks the incumbent had instrumentalized to maintain political order before the uprising were re-purposed to sustain anti-regime mobilization. Due to their all-Sunni make-up, those dense social networks were more likely to gradually adopt a sectarian outlook in response to repressive practices that were themselves overly tainted by the regime's Alawite character.

The sectarian character of regime repression was essentially the product of a lack of reliable human resources. Decades of sectarian stacking in the military and intelligence services had provided the regime with a cohesive Alawite-dominated coercive apparatus, while making Sunni members of the armed forces (which mostly consisted of rank-and-files elements, non-commissioned officers, and often frustrated officers occupying second-class positions) largely unreliable as a tool of domestic repression. Shortage of reliable manpower within regular security forces explains why, as early as in the spring of 2011, the regime resorted to plainclothes Alawite militiamen to suppress protests in the coastal Sunni-majority town of al-Bayda. Central authorities had simply called on available supporters from neighboring villages, but leaked videos of the crackdown were widely interpreted among opponents as evidence of a deliberate strategy of sectarian confrontation. This perception was

subsequently reinforced by sectarian humiliations inflicted upon arrested protesters by their Alawite jailers, who frequently forced them to utter blasphemy, or to worship pictures of Bashar al-Assad. Due to their systematic character, likewise, such practices were widely interpreted as part of a grand strategy of sectarian provocation on the part of the regime. More plausibly, they resulted from a deeply ingrained subculture prevailing among the Alawite-dominated armed forces, which for decades (most notably since the 1979-1982 Islamist insurgency) had considered Sunni religious conservatives as an existential threat.

Both sectarian recruitment in the armed forces, and the anti-Sunni outlook of pro-regime elements, intensified as the conflict became more brutal. As of June 2013, for instance, the head of regime forces in Aleppo Gen Muhammad Khaddour was recruiting fighters in Twelver Shia villages by promising them to "raise the flag of Imam Hussein" over a military airbase that was besieged by the rebels. The regime's lack of reliable manpower was also the reason for Iran's decision to enter the war at that time. The Islamic Republic was initially reluctant to overtly participate in the war out of fear of appearing as a sectarian player, to the extent of disguising the deployment of the first batch of foreign pro-Iranian fighters to Syria as a spontaneous movement. It was Assad's near-defeat in 2013, itself a result of his narrow Alawite base, that eventually forced Iran to take off the mask.

1. **How has the regime co-opted religious authority from various groups including the Sunni Muslim majority of Syria?**

The regime has coopted minority religious groups by granting their leaders a modicum of freedom to handle their internal communal affairs in exchange for unflinching political loyalty. This pattern of governance has not applied to the Alawite community, whose religious structures remains largely obscure to outside observers, and of course to Sunni Islam, which the regime sees as too much of a threat to leave it to its own device. Yet, although always heavy-handed, the regime's management of Sunni Islam has changed considerably over the last two decades. Before that, Syrian authorities privileged an informal approach in their management of the Sunni religious field. It was not official Islamic institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Endowments (which remained understaffed and underfunded), but intelligence services, that were the main instrument of the regime's policies in that respect. While undesirable elements were either eliminated or intimidated through arbitrary repressive measures, others were granted privileges such as (extremely scarce) authorizations to open private Islamic institutes and raise funds for their charities. The rationale for this strategy of "indirect rule" apparently was the regime's distrust of Sunni religious conservatives, hence its reluctance to grant them any significant foothold inside state institutions.

By the middle of this century's first decade, however, this policy was discredited on two counts. First, through bargains with/corruption of security officials, Sunni clerics had managed to carve out some genuine autonomy from the state, which they used to promote conservative values but also, in some case, to express outright criticism of regime policies. Second, mainstream religious scholars were unhappy with a regime's strategy of patronage that had favored some of them, but also liberal elements whose views they deemed as heretical (e.g. Islamic-leaning MP Muhammad Habash and Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun). By 2008, therefore, the appointment of new Minister of Religious Endowments Muhammad

'Abd al-Sattar al-Sayyid marked a major policy shift that has shaped the regime's strategy until the present day. The new policy could be summarized as an attempt to nationalize the Sunni religious field through the expansion of the Ministry of Endowment's structures and prerogatives. Most remarkably, the Ministry has reinforced its control of higher religious education, a process that accelerated after 2011: a few weeks into the uprising, three hitherto private Islamic colleges were merged into the state-run Sham Institute for Islamic Sciences, which was elevated to the rank of a university six years later.

Formal state control over the religious field was also reinforced through the establishment of a government-organized structure akin to the "popular organizations" which for decades had been used to regiment parts of the population such as factory workers and peasants. A joint venture between the Ministry of Religious Endowments and the National Union of Syrian Students, the Youth Religious Team was created in 2016 under the leadership of Minister al-Sayyid's own son Abdallah. Very much like the Baath Party itself, the team is best conceived of as a patronage structure that members join in search of political and security benefits rather than as a political movement eliciting genuine ideological conviction in its ranks. The main incentives for joining it are privileges granted to members by the ministry and security apparatus regarding appointments and authorizations for religious activities. This patronage has proven particularly appealing in formerly rebel-held areas, which remain submitted to drastic security measures years after their recapture by regime forces.

A third major step in the reorientation of the regime's religious policies was the promulgation of Law 31/2018, which provided for a comprehensive new legal framework for the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Although at the time some secularist commentators made the fantastical claim that the law would turn Syria into a Saudi-type religious state, its significance obviously lay elsewhere, namely, in the fact that the law reinforced the Ministry's prerogatives, as well al-Sayyed's personal power, within the Sunni religious field. One of the main targets of the new law was Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun, whom a bitter rivalry had opposed to Minister al-Sayyid since the latter's appointment. This enmity was rooted in a combination of (partly region-based) factionalism and, to a lesser extent, intellectual differences, since the Minister had long been close to conservative Damascene ulema who despised the Aleppo-born grand mufti's quasi-secularist and ecumenical views. Additionally, the quarrel had taken a geopolitical dimension after 2015, when the al-Sayyid family played the Russian card whereas Hassun showed increasingly reliant on Iranian support.

Exploiting Hassun's fall from grace with Assad (partly as a result of the former's business ties to the president's cousin Rami Makhluf, whose own assets were seized in 2020), al-Sayyid designed Law 31/2018 as a means to sidestep the Grand Mufti, whose life-term was reduced to three years. In 2021, therefore, Hassun was sent to retirement, while his office was abolished altogether. It was replaced by a collegial body named the Scholarly Committee of Jurisprudence and chaired by the Minister of Endowments.

The abolition of the Grand Muftiship sent shockwaves among the Syrian opposition, among which it was widely perceived as a brazen attack on the country's Sunni religious identity. In response, therefore, the oppositionist, Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council appointed its

chairman Sheikh Usama al-Rifa'i as Syria's new Grand Mufti in December 2021. Yet, the regime's decision probably had less to do with a purported anti-Sunni strategy, than with Minister al-Sayyid's maneuvers not only to settle scores with his rival Hassun, but also to achieve long-standing objectives of the Sunni religious establishment. As early as 2006, indeed, leading Syrian religious scholars had established a collegial body with the avowed goal in mind of turning it into the country's supreme religious authority. This genuinely bottom-up move was motivated by the scholars' dissatisfaction with existing institutional arrangements, which excluded them in favor of a lone Grand Mufti who was at the same time ineffective (Syrian Grand Muftis hardly ever issued fatwas since the 1960s) and, in the case of Hassun, held what they perceived as dangerously nonconformist (notably, liberal and pro-Shia) religious views. Prewar plans to establish a collegial religious authority had failed, notably due to the regime's reluctance to empower Sunni clerics. Assad's approval of a similar move as of 2021 probably owes much to wartime developments, which considerably decreased the potential threat from such a collegial body. Whereas Minister al-Sayyid and his supporters demonstrated unshakeable loyalty to the regime throughout the conflict, a mass exodus of pro-opposition religious scholars purged Syria's religious elite from elements that were long seen as politically unreliable.

In conclusion, recent developments have led the regime to give its religious bureaucrats growing prerogatives to police the religious field. Although Minister al-Sayyid and his colleagues have justified their new role in the name of combating extremist views such as those of Jihadi groups, recent experience has shown that they also aim to cleanse Syrian Islam from other kinds of "deviant" views that originate from the religious establishment itself. Indeed, the first victim of the Scholarly Council of Jurisprudence was none else than Grand Mufti Hassun, whose dismissal was legitimized by a communiqué of the Council scorning what it considered as his faulty, overly "nationalist" interpretation of the Coran, which according to him contained a metaphorical map of Syria.